

Bloomberg News Taps Politics Prof. Hisham Ahmed for Insight on Israeli - Palestinian Peace Talks Saint Mary's College

Palestinian TV Station's Saga Holds Lessons for Kerry – Bloomberg

Muamar Orabi can tell Secretary of State John Kerry how hard it is to make progress in the Holy Land. The top U.S. diplomat has been pushing since February to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Orabi is just trying to broadcast news reports in the Palestinian territories.

Orabi, director of the West Bank's only secular, independent television station, has struggled against all sides to keep Wattan TV on the air. He's been trying for more than a year to retrieve \$300,000 of U.S.-provided equipment seized by Israeli troops. After reports about official corruption, the Palestinian Authority has shut down the station temporarily on a number of occasions and has hauled its reporters into court.

“We're facing a lot of hurdles, from the Israeli side and from the Palestinian side,” said George Sahhar, Wattan TV's communications manager.

The same could be said of Kerry, who's thrown himself into resuscitating Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations that haven't budged in almost three years. The top U.S. diplomat, who has traveled to Israel four times since February and is scheduled to return next week, is pushing for renewed talks amid a crush of competing demands in the volatile Middle East.

Kerry postponed a trip to Israel last week for meetings in Washington as the Obama administration decided to send weapons to opposition fighters in Syria's civil war. Voters in Iran, which continues its push for a nuclear program, elected a new

president last weekend, and the U.S. is starting talks with the Taliban about peace in Afghanistan.

‘No Time’

When Kerry warned that time is running out for a two-state solution, sealing a peace agreement between Israel and an independent Palestinian state, Orabi and Sahhar agreed.

“All of us, politically wise, are afraid about the future and the two-state solution,” Orabi said while visiting Washington to appeal for State Department help in recovering his equipment. “There’s no time to wait, this is the time to make a two-state solution.”

In Israel and the West Bank, new hurdles pop up frequently. Israeli Minister of Economics and Trade Naftali Bennett said June 17 that attempts to reach a two-state solution were “pointless” and had reached a “dead end.”

“The attempt to establish a Palestinian state in our land has ended,” Bennett, the leader of the Jewish Home Party and former settlement leader, told a gathering of the Yesha settlement group. “The most important thing in the Land of Israel is to build, build, build. It’s important that there will be an Israeli presence everywhere. Our principal problem is still Israel’s leaders’ unwillingness to say in a simple manner that the land of Israel belongs to the people of Israel.”

‘Face Reality’

Chief Palestinian Negotiator Saeb Erekat responded by saying the global community needed to “face reality” and understand the “real plans of the Israeli government to destroy the two-state solution.”

Talks ground to a halt in September 2010. Despite efforts by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas insisted that Israel continue a freeze on Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refused. Israel wants the talks to resume without any such preconditions.

Nabil Abu Rdeneh, an adviser to Abbas, said today their Fatah political party rejects any pressure for Palestinians to drop their settlement demands, in an apparent reference to Kerry's efforts, the Associated Press reported.

On his most recent Mideast visit in late May, Kerry promoted a plan to provide \$4 billion in investment to boost the Palestinian economy, an effort to build confidence and smooth the path toward renewed negotiations.

'More Calamity'

That idea has been ridiculed by Palestinian commentators such as Hisham Ahmed, a politics professor at Saint Mary's College in Moraga, California. "To flood the area with economic resources and expect that's going to help the peace process isn't going to work," Ahmed said in a phone interview.

Ahmed pointed out that this year marks the 20th anniversary of the Oslo accords, the 1993 framework meant to lead to a peace settlement. "Doing things the same way they have been done for 20 years brings only more calamity, more despair," he said. "There ought to be a departure" in Kerry's approach, "something different."

Despite Kerry's four visits to the region this year, Israelis and Palestinians show no signs of being closer to resuming talks. Both profess a willingness to do so, each blames the other for the continued freeze, and each has taken recent steps that angered the other.

Expanding Settlement

Israel announced on May 30 plans to expand a settlement in East Jerusalem, where Palestinians hope to establish their capital, a move the State Department called “unproductive.” Palestinians said it undermines Kerry’s efforts.

The following week, Palestinians signaled that they might resume their quest to join the International Criminal Court. Some Israelis say they fear the Palestinians would use membership on the court to pursue war-crime charges against their country.

“We have the full right of our instrument of access to all UN agencies,” Erekat, the Palestinian negotiator, said June 4, according to the AP. “And those who worry about international courts should stop committing crimes.”

Weighing Choices

Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Zeev Elkin responded a day later, saying the Palestinians aren’t interested in peace and are focused only on gaining international recognition.

Amid the sniping, Kerry said on June 3 that he’s “confident that both sides are weighing the choices that they have in front of them very, very seriously.”

Later that day, addressing the American Jewish Committee, an advocacy group in Washington, Kerry pleaded for action. “We’re running out of time,” he said. “Let’s be clear, if we do not succeed now, and I know I’m raising the stakes, we may not get another chance.”

After last week's postponement, Kerry will visit Israel and Jordan from June 27 to June 29 for meetings on the Middle East peace process, State Department spokeswoman Jennifer Psaki said today. If his last trip is any guide, Kerry will visit the Palestinian presidential compound in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Coverage Ban

Wattan TV isn't likely to be there: Palestinian officials have barred it from covering events at the compound. The station operates with about \$2 million in grants from the U.S. Agency for International Development and other groups, including the National Endowment for Democracy; the Open Society Foundations a pro-democracy advocacy group; and the U.S. Institute of Peace, a nonpartisan group created by Congress.

Wattan's reports exposing the use of illegal pesticides and corruption involving Palestinian leaders' children have alienated officials who aren't above arresting journalists and, as happened in May 2012, blocking websites that criticize Abbas.

Sahhar, the Wattan communications manager, thinks the wave of Arab revolutions has led officials to clamp down on the media for fear the unrest will spread to the West Bank. "They're afraid of a Palestinian Spring," Sahhar said.

Sahhar and Orabi have gone to the Israeli High Court of Justice to challenge the confiscation of their equipment and the claim they were operating illegally. Israeli army officials said in an e-mail that the station's signal doesn't comply with international standards and was harming legal telecommunications networks.

Michael Sfard, a Tel Aviv lawyer who represents Wattan TV, said in an e-mail that the army's claim is "absolutely shocking, as it contains false assertions which the IDF has not included in its submissions to the High Court."

Filling Vacuum

Orabi and Sahhar said they suspect the Israeli army wants to use the frequency for West Bank settlements. While some of their equipment was returned in January, all of it was damaged beyond use, they said. They say there's an urgent need to get back on the air at full force.

If the station is silenced for good, Orabi says the void may be filled by groups that don't care about secular democracy, free speech or peace.

"There's lots of room in our region for bad feelings," Sahhar said. "If we cease talking about our values, there will be a vacuum that will give extremist sources more of a chance to speak."